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The Sepulchral Monument 'Mašsebah'

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IN Gen. 35 20, we are told that Jacob set up a mašsebah upon the grave of Rachel. The narrator adds that "the same is the pillar of Rachel's grave unto this day." In 2 Sam. 18 18 it is narrated that Absalom reared up for himself a mašsebah, for he said, "I have no son to keep my name in remembrance." Of this pillar it is said that it was called "the hand of Absalom unto this day."

From these passages it follows that it was the duty of a son to set up a mašsebah upon the grave of his father, and that such a mašsebah was also called 'hand.' This proves that such sepulchral monuments as those mentioned in Gen. 35 20 and 2 Sam. 18 18 were common. From Isa. 56 5 we see that it was customary to set up 'hands' in memory of deceased relatives. The prophet promises that the eunuchs who keep the sabbaths of Jahve will be rewarded by sepulchral monuments that will be built within the walls of the temple of Jahve. "Unto them I will give in mine house and within my walls a 'hand' and a name that is better than the possession of sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name, that shall not be erased."

The name of the deceased man or woman was cut into the mašsebah, and it obviously was a dreadful thing if this

name was effaced or erased. Until the present day the tombstones set up in Jewish cemeteries are called 'massebah.' If the Jewish grave is not adorned by erected stone tablets, as, for example, in Tunis, Sousse, and other North African places, the small stone tablet that is laid down upon the grave is still called a 'massebah.'

What is the meaning of the setting up of such a monument from the earliest times until the present day? R. Duval has written a learned article on this subject.¹ He explains the monument as a memorial to the life of the deceased person. But this interpretation does not explain why the monument has the form of a massebah, an erected pillar of stone. Furthermore, we fail to understand the high importance of these monuments for deceased persons. It certainly is a good thing to have some reason for hoping that one's memory will not be at once extinguished, but if it were only a memorial, it would not be a great mishap if a person should die without the certainty that a massebah would be set up in his honor; for there are many other and more successful ways of honoring the lives of deceased persons than by building monuments over their graves.

Nevertheless R. Duval has shown the way to the solution of this question by drawing attention to the fact that the sepulchral monument was also called 'nefesh,' that is, 'soul.' Tract Shekalim ii. 5 deals with the question what to do with the money that remains from the costs of a funeral. Rabbi Nathan said that this money was to be used for building a 'soul' over the grave. This name was very common, and is used in the First Book of Maccabees for the cone-shaped pillars that were placed upon the building covering a tomb. "Simon erected a building upon the grave of his father and his brothers. He made it so high that it could be seen from a long distance. On the top of it he placed seven pyramids for his father, his mother, and his four brothers."² Obviously the seventh was destined for himself. The word 'pyramids'

¹ *Revue Sémitique*, 1894, p. 259 (Note sur le monument funéraire appelé nefesh).

² 1 Macc. 13 27 f.

is translated by 'souls' in the Syriac text. On the monumental tomb of Helena, Isates, and Monobazus three 'souls' were placed.³

The term 'soul' for sepulchral pillar also occurs in inscriptions at Palmyra, on Nabatean graves, and on Aramaic steles,⁴ and is also used by the southern Semites.⁵ "Ueberall bei den Süd-Semiten begegnet man die Stele als wichtigster Bestandteil der Gräber. Zwischen ihr und der Persönlichkeit des Verstorbenen scheint ein innerer Zusammenhang zu bestehen, daher heisst sie *nephesh* (Seele)."⁵

New light on this problem of the original meaning of this sepulchral monument is thrown by the results of the excavations of Professor E. Sellin at Tell Ta'annek in the plain of Jezreel. He excavated a pair of stone pillars, *masseboth*, of various shapes. One of them has a deep notch across its top.⁶ Now everybody who has visited a Moslem cemetery in the lands surrounding the Mediterranean knows that the pillars over the graves of women are of different shape from those over the graves of men. On the grave of a man the small round pillar is adorned by a turban; the grave of a woman bears a small pillar of straight form, which is flat at the top. Sometimes at the top there is a slight excavation. If we compare these 'souls' or 'masseboth' of the present day with the pillars of Ta'annek, we at once see that one of these forms must represent a female symbol. The other must consequently be a male symbol. This fully agrees with the fact that in an old Jewish cemetery in Switzerland, between Langnau and Endingen, there are some *masseboth* that have a notch in their top in exactly the same way as one of the Ta'annek pillars.⁷

³ de Vogüé, *Syrie centrale*, p. 90.

⁴ Cf. J. Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentumes*, p. 7, note; *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*, II, no. 162, inscription of Suwaida; no. 196, inscription of Medeba; Lidzbarski, *Handbuch der Nordsemitischen Epigraphik*, I, 139, 325.

⁵ Cf. Littmann in the Report on the German expedition to Abyssinia in *Abhandlungen der Königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, 1906.

⁶ Cf. J. Benzinger, *Hebräische Archäologie*², p. 325.

⁷ Cf. *Jewish Encyclopædia*, art. "Cemetery."

Then a wide field of investigation opens itself to us. For we find stone pillars of this shape not only in Ta'annek, but also in Egypt, in the form of obelisks. Besides the common obelisk, with its pointed top, we find the so-called An-pillar, of which the top is notched across. My friend Professor W. B. Kristensen has drawn my attention to *Description de l'Égypte*, A. I, pl. 15 (Philæ), no. 12, where the An-obelisk is crossed by the phallus. The common obelisk with the pointed top has certainly something to do with the phallus, for Wiedemann⁸ tells us that small wooden obelisks are found in which only phalli were buried. I cannot enter here into the details of this question, but I think that these two facts give sufficient evidence for our theory that the stone obelisk maṣṣebah represents sometimes the male, sometimes the female, form. We actually find that the pillars before the temple at Paphos had notched tops.⁹ Another female maṣṣebah is found in Geser.¹⁰

If we have to assume that the maṣṣebah is connected with the male and the female principles of life, we can interpret the stone pillar only as a form of the phallus. The pillar of which the top is notched must be interpreted as a symbol of the female pudenda. In some old cemeteries in the Dutch Indies and Japan we find various instances of the custom of setting upon the graves pillars which leave no doubt about the sex of the deceased person.¹¹

The primitive ideas about life after death fully explain the original meaning of this 'maṣṣebah' monument. It is generally believed that all the parts of the human body which show the power of life and growth that inhabits a living man are seats of life. The hair is constantly growing, therefore it is supposed to have some mysterious power. The nails are regarded in the same way as things containing magical power. So all that is connected with sexuality is

⁸ *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte*, i, p. 372.

⁹ Cf. the coin with the outline of the temple-front in Perrot and Chipiez, *Histoire de l'Art dans l'Antiquité*, 3, 120.

¹⁰ Cf. Hugues Vincent, *Canaan d'après l'Exploration Récente*, pp. 111, 114.

¹¹ Cf. E. Bälz, in the *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 1901, pp. 180, 182.

considered to be 'taboo,' and the many forms of amulets used in Oriental lands until the present day show the great power ascribed to sexual symbols. It is therefore easily understood that representations of the male and the female sexual life were chosen as symbols with which the power of life was especially connected.

According to primitive religious belief, the soul, embodied in the breath, leaves the body of a dying man. The soul, however, remains in the neighborhood of the corpse, and is near the grave, at least during the first weeks after the burial. Now it is necessary that this soul have a place of rest, in order not to be compelled to wander about. It must receive food and drink at proper times, and is supposed to do mischief to the surviving relatives if no shelter and food are offered. The *massebah* is easily explained as a house for the soul. Therefore the name of the deceased person is inscribed upon it; and the monument itself is called 'soul.' The male form was chosen for the graves of men, the female form for the graves of women.

It is very common that customs are preserved during centuries without anybody really understanding the original meaning of them. In such cases a new meaning may be combined with them. Thus the male form of the *massebah* was transformed by the later Moslems into a small pillar crowned with a turban. The Jewish *massebah* became a flat stone tablet, sometimes even a small tablet of marble laid flat upon the grave. In the various shapes of these tablets there is now very seldom anything which recalls the original meaning, but the names *massebah* and *nepshesh* show that the tombstone of the present Jewish cemeteries has a story to tell which is connected with the most primitive religious ideas of mankind.